

# Religious Crisis, Ethical Life, and Kierkegaard's Critique of Christendom

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## 1. Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard has been frequently associated with fideism, that is, the affirmation of the priority of faith and religion over reason and even ethics in public life.<sup>1</sup> One not atypical work can claim: "The greatest exponent of fideism in modern times was Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard, Christianity is the denial of everything we rationally think."<sup>2</sup> Likewise, in his contribution on fideism in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, Terrence Penelhum identifies Kierkegaard with "evangelical fideism," which he describes not so much as a distrust of reason as a trust in God that necessarily has the distrust of reason as its consequence.<sup>3</sup>

I propose in this paper that the standard interpretation of Kierkegaard as a "fideist" or "fundamentalist" is oversimplifying and in need of complication. Insofar as: (1) his writings do not only concern religious faith but more extensively ethical and aesthetic life and (2) he distinguished what is appropriately religious from what is appropriately secular, rejecting the reduction of the latter to the former. The fideist reading has had serious consequences for addressing Kierkegaard and his contemporary significance.<sup>4</sup> Hegelian critics of Kierkegaard such as Fred Dallmayr contend that Kierkegaard desecralizes the public realm of objective spirit (objektiver Geist) and thus "robs it of its ethical significance."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of different senses of fideism, including responsible and irresponsible varieties, see C. Stephen Evans, *Faith beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 78.

<sup>2</sup> H. K. Bond, S. D. Kunin, and F. A. Murphy, *Religious Studies and Theology: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 465.

<sup>3</sup> Terrence Penelhum, "Fideism," in P. L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 377.

<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, "fideism" still signals an important issue in interpreting Kierkegaard, as argued in John J. Davenport, "The Meaning of Kierkegaard's Choice between the Aesthetic and the Ethical," in J. Davenport, A. Rudd, A. C. MacIntyre, and P. L. Quinn, *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), 77. Bulent Diken labels Kierkegaard "the philosopher of fundamentalism" in *Nihilism* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2009), 81.

<sup>5</sup> Fred R. Dallmayr, *G. W. F. Hegel: Modernity and Politics* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1993), 191-192.

The fideism label hides a striking element of Kierkegaard's works; its differentiation and individuation of multiple spheres, stages, and forms of life. Kierkegaard distinguishes and multiplies them in relation to a variety of individuals and examples rather than amalgamating and integrating them in one vision of: fideist faith, fundamentalist enthusiasm, postmodern undecidability, or postsecular revivalism. Such multiplicity is oriented toward the unique singular individual, in contrast with doctrines and movements; and in defiance of the reduction of individuals to the numerical masses or multitudes in which they are treated as interchangeable. This differentiation is noteworthy in his ethically-oriented assault on established "Christendom," as he rejected its conflation of: Christian faith and earthly power, love for the neighbor and domination of others, and religious community and the state; that is, what is distinctively religious and what is properly secular. Whereas a rigorous fideism subsumes or eliminates any independent meaning to reason and secular life, since Athens has nothing to do with Jerusalem, Kierkegaard distinguishes the rational and the political from faith and thus preserves their own significance. Kierkegaard relies on the strategies of Socrates (the most Athenian of thinkers) to modify those of Tertullian (the traditional paradigm of Christian fideism). Kierkegaard adopts the absurdity and paradox of the cross and praises the seriousness of Tertullian's Christianity, while resisting his claim that Christian faith should be freed from everything rational, pagan, and Greek.<sup>6</sup>

Kierkegaard's critical evaluation of the secularization promoted in the present age, or modernity, is well-known, and is often misused to justify interpreting his works as "reactionary fideism." What is less recognized is the inverse critique, namely, that a Christianity that fails to recognize its difference from the secular confuses redemptive faith with calculative sagacity and the exercise of worldly dominion; and is consequently no longer redemptive at all. In this sense, Kierkegaard suggests a plural and hence necessarily non-fideist as well as anti-Hegelian conception of "ethical life" [*Sittlichkeit*]. Kierkegaard's ethical life is oriented by love of the concrete singular neighbor, in contrast with the worldly power of politicized faith and the authoritarian religious institutions of Hegelian civil

<sup>6</sup> On Kierkegaard's Socratic approach to Tertullian, see Pierre Bühler, "Tertullian: The Teacher of the credo quia absurdum," *Kierkegaard and the Patristic and Medieval Traditions* (Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, vol. 4), ed. Jon Stewart (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 135. On Kierkegaard's Socrates, see Jacob Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

society. As evident from works such as *The Book on Adler*, *Two Ages*, and his later polemical writings, Kierkegaard rejected the theocratic or imperial Christendom associated with fundamentalism just as much as he critiqued Hegel's objective spirit and its integration and consequent confusion of state, church, and civil society.<sup>7</sup>

I propose an alternative reading with implications for current debates over the relation between the religious and the secular, by examining how Kierkegaard differentiated them.<sup>8</sup> It is a common assumption, one made by Dallmayr above, that Kierkegaard denies the significance of the secular sphere in order to shift it to religious life. A more contextualized reading indicates that Kierkegaard does not reduce the entirety of the ethical to religious faith. The religious and the secular both have their ethical aspects, as faith and love contrast with the more limited yet not unethical categories of duty and virtue. This recognition of the ethical moment in secular and even non-Christian pagan life continues in his most polemically Christian writings published near the end of his life in *The Fatherland* and *The Moment*.

In his late short provocations to the Christendom that confuses: state and church, politics and belief, and habit with truth, Kierkegaard interpreted Christianity as calling for the ethical renunciation, rather than political calculation and the intensification, of worldly authority and power. This ethical interruption and interrogation of the political, whether it be conservative or reformist, includes issues of current controversy such as the justification of war and the control of marriage by state and church, which for Kierkegaard have nothing to do with living Christianly. He thus calls on actually existing Christendom to become genuinely Christian by turning away from coercion and calculative sagacity concerning power, status, and wealth.

Kierkegaard did not propose the separation of the religious and the secular, as his "reformist" contemporaries might have wished, for the sake of the processes of secularization characteristic of the present modern

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<sup>7</sup> On Kierkegaard's familiarity with Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, see Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20-21. Alastair Hannay stresses the importance of the ethical character of Kierkegaard's critique of Hegelian moral and political categories, such as "objective spirit," in *Kierkegaard and Philosophy Selected Essays* (London: Routledge, 2003), 36.

<sup>8</sup> On the religious and the secular as an ethical issue, also see E. S. Nelson, "The Secular, the Religious, and the Ethical in Kierkegaard and Levinas," *Despite Oneself: Subjectivity and its Secret in Kierkegaard and Levinas*, ed. C. Welz and K. Verstrynge, (London: Turnshare, 2008), 91-109; and "Levinas and Early Confucian Ethics: Religion, Ritual, and the Sources of Morality," *Levinas Studies* 4 (2009), 177-207.

age.<sup>9</sup> He argues that Christianity needs the separation of state and church, politics and faith, because Christianity is deformed and undermined in being confounded with worldly authority and calculative prudence. This conflation of redemptive faith and instrumental power reduces Christianity to transient political objectives however well- or ill-intentioned. As earthly authorities and institutions are inherently distinct from divine authority for Kierkegaard, since they are fundamentally transient and vanishing, these calculative and self-interested purposes must vary and evaporate with their mortal practitioners. In Kierkegaard's analysis of human authority, "in the relation between persons qua human beings, no *enduring* or *constant* difference of authority was *thinkable*."<sup>10</sup>

Kierkegaard's critique of authoritarianism does not abolish either divine authority or earthly authorities. It is their irreconcilability with the genuinely religious that is his focal point.<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard consequently radicalized the difference between the secular and the religious in order to center Christianity on what he interprets as its inner truth—the freedom, responsibility, and redemption of the singular concrete individual that is fully actualized in relation to God. By provoking and unsettling Christendom, Kierkegaard's polemic would in Socratic or deconstructive fashion awaken Christianity to itself.<sup>12</sup> This self-awakening, like the one Socrates demanded, is fundamentally ethical. Unlike Socrates, it is christianly ethical in being motivated by faith and yet oriented towards the other as individual person, as shown for instance in *Works of Love*. Rather than reducing his critique to an accident of biography or psychology, it is making a significant truth-claim about the very meaning of Christian ethical life. This potential was noted by a contemporary, despite the intense controversies and denunciations associated with these late writings, when Magdalene Hansen remarked in a letter concerning *The Moment*: the question is not so much "What sort of person is S. K.?" as it is—Socratically, self-reflexively, and ethically—"Am I a Christian?"<sup>13</sup> This is not so much a dogmatic issue of what one believes or the content of belief, given that Christendom—including its commitment to an orthodoxy of be-

<sup>9</sup> *M*, 411, 574.

<sup>10</sup> *WA*, 101.

<sup>11</sup> *WA*, 104-105.

<sup>12</sup> *M*, 314, 341.

<sup>13</sup> *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*, ed. Bruce H. Kirmmse, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 106. Self-reflexive and self-reflective should be distinguished as forms of self-relation, as the latter is only one variety of the former, which can be non-conceptual.

lief that is unconcerned with genuine or living faith —is the greatest threat to a Christian life,<sup>14</sup> as it is an ethical question—in the Socratic sense—of how one lives one’s immanent worldly life as an individual.

## 2. Faith or Power?

Kierkegaard’s “attack” on established Christendom has been inadequately portrayed as a “fideistic reaction” against the growing “liberalization” and “secularization” of church and society in nineteenth-century Denmark. Kierkegaard’s negative assessments of liberal theology and social-political secularization are common places, even to the point of the oversimplification of his complex relation with classic figures of liberal theology such as Lessing and Schleiermacher.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Kierkegaard did not advocate the traditional integration in “objective spirit” of church, king, and state characteristic of conservative nostalgia for pre-modern Christianity. He was indeed deeply suspicious of a Christianity that fails to recognize its absolute difference from the secular and the political spheres, which is a characteristic of traditional as well as contemporary institutional Christendom, and which thereby confuses redemptive faith with worldly calculative power.

Kierkegaard emphatically warned of a merely external Christianity concerned with power, and thus a danger to rather than an agent for others: “Truly, there is something that is more against Christianity and the essence of Christianity than any heresy, any schism, more than all heresies and schisms together, and it is this: to play at Christianity.” Such play means, he continued, “to remove all the dangers (Christianly, witness and danger are equivalent), to replace them with power (to be a danger to others), goods, advantages, abundant enjoyment...”<sup>16</sup> To make this distinction clearer, it is formulated in absolute terms. Christianity is either heterogeneous with the world, and it is increasingly marked by renunciation and suffering in Kierkegaard’s later writings, or it is nothing at all.<sup>17</sup> Whereas in his earlier thought the knight of faith regained the world in sacrificing it, and is portrayed as having a kind of ease in her or his dis-

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<sup>14</sup> *M*, 160-161.

<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard criticizes abstract reflection and rationality, yet there is a significant role for reflection and the modern concern for self-reflexivity in his thought, as Jan-Olav Henriksen argues in *The Reconstruction of Religion: Lessing, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 72, 194-196.

<sup>16</sup> *M*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> *M*, 10.

tance to the everyday world in works such as *Fear and Trembling*, in these late writings absolute heterogeneity is stressed, and its abjection and suffering. Despite the consistency of his thought concerning this claim, the hoped for reconciliation through unconditional sacrifice appears more imminent in his earlier than in these later writings.

In response to the worldly institutionalization and politicization of Christianity, and its accompanying reduction to the self-interested calculations of shrewdness or “worldly sagacity (as if it were politics, a kingdom of this world),”<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard depicted Christianity as the renunciation rather than the escalation of worldly authority and power. Indeed, its orthogonality with the world entails “the greatest distance from all use or assistance of worldly power.”<sup>19</sup> Christianity is not power at all in the earthly sense. It does not depend on the coercion of censors, police, or numerical public opinion. As the demand for the eternal responsibility of the self for itself, it is fundamentally an anti-power and not another power among others.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, despite fideist readings of *Fear and Trembling*, the religious is the exception to public universal morality—and thus cannot be the rule for public life that fideism demands—and yet is singularly ethical in being self-responsibility before God.

Earthly authority, which Kierkegaard does not oppose in earthly affairs, cannot motivate Christian responsibility. It is hearing the address and responsiveness to it that singles one out and constitutes one’s responsibility.<sup>21</sup> It is hence a Christian’s duty to be responsive and answerable for the hope within and thereby be a witness to Christianity.<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard could therefore remark, in an unpublished draft of *The Moment*, No. 10, “to the same degree that Christianity is a gift it is also a responsibility.”<sup>23</sup> Accepting the gift is constitutive of responsibility for it. Christianity cannot then make one an anonymous Christian. It separates and singles out suddenly and unconditionally without degrees, conditions, or possible recourse to skilful prudence or calculative sagacity.<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard contended elsewhere that such finite or secular prudence is incompatible with

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<sup>18</sup> *M*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> *M*, 20.

<sup>20</sup> *M*, 20-23.

<sup>21</sup> *M*, 73.

<sup>22</sup> *M*, 79.

<sup>23</sup> *M*, 336.

<sup>24</sup> *M*, 83.

passion in general and Christianity in particular.<sup>25</sup> Prudence is not even a moral category in Kierkegaard, for whom—like Kant—it is pre-ethical.<sup>26</sup> Sagacity, contrary to its self-perceived coolness and realism, in reality conforms to the intoxication of the world, and ignores the genuine sobriety that is concerned with “[coming] to oneself in self-knowledge and before God.”<sup>27</sup> For sagacity, however, this decisive and incalculable moment—the moment of the new and of eternity—“never arrives.”<sup>28</sup>

According to Kierkegaard, the state and the political are oriented toward the calculation of power, status, and wealth. To embrace this approach to the world is to forget the decisive question of the self. While the state calculates according to the category of the numerical, Christianity is inversely related to the numerical—in which the plural is homogeneous and identical—in accentuating the non-numerical singular individual.<sup>29</sup> Whereas Christianity signifies the separation, singling out, and individuation of “all” into “each,” the state integrates and totalizes all into one.<sup>30</sup> Christianity betrays itself, committing more than a conceptual category mistake, when it conforms to a worldly numerical logic that is indifferently unconcerned with the salvation of one. As power, established official Christendom confuses itself by identifying with the state, and it becomes proportionally less Christian the more state-like, integrating, and authoritarian it becomes.<sup>31</sup> In Christendom, in contrast with what Kierkegaard portrays as genuine Christianity, religious truth is reduced to political shrewdness such that priestly power is exemplified by its cunning for Kierkegaard as much as for Nietzsche.<sup>32</sup>

The distance Kierkegaard introduces between Christianity and power includes concrete instances such as legitimating violence and war and the

<sup>25</sup> *TA*, 111; *JP*, 6: 180, 359.

<sup>26</sup> On prudence in Kant, see R. M. Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 100-101; and E. S. Nelson, “Moral and Political Prudence in Kant,” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 44: 3 (September 2004), 305-319.

<sup>27</sup> *JFY*, 103-104.

<sup>28</sup> *M*, 338.

<sup>29</sup> *M*, 143.

<sup>30</sup> *M*, 162.

<sup>31</sup> *M*, 199.

<sup>32</sup> *M*, 199. I discuss priestly power in Nietzsche in E. S. Nelson, “Priestly Power and Damaged Life in Nietzsche and Adorno,” *Nietzsche: Philosoph der Kultur(en)?* ed. A. U. Sommer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 349-356. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche both associate priestly cunning with the feminine, on Kierkegaard’s language concerning women during this period, see Julia Watkin, “The Logic of Søren Kierkegaard’s Misogyny, 1854-1855,” *Feminist Interpretations of Kierkegaard*, ed. C. Léon and S. Walsh (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1997), 69-79.

churchly control of the institution of marriage, which he argues are incompatible with Christianity.<sup>33</sup> God commanded humans not to kill, yet their churches bless and sanctify human violence and murder.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, marriage is already removed from the New Testament ideal of a life of chastity lived in devotion to God, and thus should not concern the church much less be a source of profit for it.<sup>35</sup> Kierkegaard's separation of the political and religious, or secular and Christian, functions of marriage stands against its politicization in Christendom or merely liberalizing the religious institution of marriage, which both leave the problematic confusion of the religious and political intact. In both war and marriage, Kierkegaard identified the central problem as being the role of the priest and Christendom in blessing and maintaining what it has no legitimate right to sanctify and sustain, if it is not going to confuse the human and the divine and *dulia et latria*, i.e., what is distinctively owed to each.

Kierkegaard proposes that the Christian does not seek to exercise dominion over others but lovingly serve them,<sup>36</sup> Christendom is more about power and domination than faith, and therefore that Christendom cannot be New Testament Christianity.<sup>37</sup> Turning away from authoritarian coercion and calculative absorption in power, status, and wealth,<sup>38</sup> Christendom can only be Christian by deinstitutionalizing itself as one power among others and promoting ethical and religious individuation through love, hope, and faith in God and the neighbor.<sup>39</sup> Kierkegaard's either/or unrelentingly allows neither a skeptical suspension of judgment, indifference, nor indecision. It persistently forces a decision, differentiates, and makes one responsible. Kierkegaard would reject any postmodern undecidability that smuggled in an affirmation of the religious. It is the pattern of Christendom to make all Christian and accordingly disingenuously Christian without the living situation of rupture, decision, and individuation. To refuse Christ's rejection of earthly power, to declare

<sup>33</sup> *M*, 245-249.

<sup>34</sup> *M*, 246.

<sup>35</sup> *M*, 247; although his assessment of marriage has been read as misogyny, Julia Watkin notes that his critique concerns both male and female roles and need not be reduced to hostility to women in "The Logic of Søren Kierkegaard's Misogyny," 78.

<sup>36</sup> *TA*, 109.

<sup>37</sup> *M*, 28.

<sup>38</sup> *M*, 14, 20.

<sup>39</sup> This ethical approach to Kierkegaard's anti-authoritarianism and religiously oriented egalitarianism differs from R. L. Perkins' political reading in "The Authoritarian Symbiosis of Church and Crown in Søren Kierkegaard's 'Attack Upon Christendom,'" in *Anthropology and Authority: Essays on Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Poul Houe (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), 137-143.

that this would be a disarmament that is contrary to worldly self-interest and prudence, is to conform to the calculative logic governing the world. It is to agree to the temptations that Jesus refused in the desert rather than answer to and emulate the ultimate Christian prototype of Christ, who is incommensurable with Caesar.

### 3. Christianity or Christendom?

Kierkegaard concluded that “official Christianity, the proclamation of official Christianity, is not in any sense the Christianity of the New Testament.”<sup>40</sup> In the fallen Christianity of Christendom, the drama of faith, hope, and love, of grace and redemption, is forgotten in the machinations of earthly interests and the self-absorbed maintenance of power. In calculating costs and benefits according to worldly prudence, the individual cannot be the troubling and interruptive conscience to the world that genuine Christianity calls for.<sup>41</sup> It is not comfort and safeness but the risk and danger of faith and witnessing—to the point of persecution and death—that are exemplary of Christian life and reveal its truth for Kierkegaard; just as, conversely, the profits and comforts of Christendom reveal its untruth.<sup>42</sup> Since the Christian establishment is concerned with exercising power over as many and as much as possible (i.e., the numerical), it promotes the avoidance of the genuine risks of Christian life, which—being an unconditional even if an imperfect love—must be a suffering love for the world.<sup>43</sup> This love of the world, which does not love itself in having no distance from itself, is extreme. It even includes love for one’s enemies. It is a love that is distanced from the instrumental logic governing the modern world and its indifferent tranquilization in the masses.<sup>44</sup> Such a radical unconditional love is not the love that identifies with and conforms to its object. Instead, as one can love the individuals who make up a crowd without being absorbed in or becoming one with that crowd, it is a love that loves the object in separating and individuating itself from it.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *M*, 28.

<sup>41</sup> *M*, 164-165.

<sup>42</sup> *M*, 324-325.

<sup>43</sup> *M*, 165.

<sup>44</sup> *M*, 177, 206.

<sup>45</sup> *M*, 184.

The non-absorption in immediacy demanded by Christianity presupposes maturity and its distance.<sup>46</sup> This is why, in the face of practices such as baptism and confirmation, Kierkegaard concluded that newborns and children are precluded from making a genuine decision for Christianity.<sup>47</sup> The Christian accordingly acts for the sake of each other as a neighbor without being absorbed and tranquilized like others.<sup>48</sup> As a stranger and alien in this world, the Christian does not cling to immediacy and its passions.<sup>49</sup> Christian passion is instead devotion to “God alone in the most complete separation.”<sup>50</sup> Either one believes, follows, and imitates Christ, as “*the prototype*” that places “unconditionally everyone under obligation;”<sup>51</sup> or one imitates the multitudes and replicates the age—even if one constantly speaks about being a Christian.<sup>52</sup> Whereas the genuine knight of faith has faith and a way of life, “the spurious knight” is a sectarian and self-promoter.<sup>53</sup>

To the extent that “Christianity is spirit,” and the truth of spirit, it is for Kierkegaard incompatible with Caesar or with political institutions and ideas. There is no such thing, since they would be self-refuting concepts, as “Christian states, Christian countries, a Christian nation, a—amazing!—a Christian world.”<sup>54</sup> A significant consequence for Kierkegaard is the impossibility of Christian theocracy or theocratic Christianity; “neither a church state nor a state church is a goal of Christianity.”<sup>55</sup>

The more forcefully church and state are conflated, the less Christianity one finds; especially in a nation that congratulates itself for being “Christian” while practicing the contrary of Christianity. Christendom could conquer the entire world, turning the numerical into a totality, and yet not one soul would be redeemed or saved; or worse, given that this “all” would be tranquilized and indifferent.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *M*, 238.

<sup>47</sup> *M*, 238.

<sup>48</sup> *M*, 314-315.

<sup>49</sup> *M*, 257, 248.

<sup>50</sup> *M*, 332.

<sup>51</sup> *M*, 292.

<sup>52</sup> *JFY*, 187-188.

<sup>53</sup> *FT*, 79; on humility and “godliness of life” as a criterion of religiosity in Kierkegaard, see Julia Watkin, *Kierkegaard* (London: Continuum, 1997), 88-89.

<sup>54</sup> *M*, 37.

<sup>55</sup> M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 95.

<sup>56</sup> *M*, 42-43.

#### 4. The Secular, the Religious, and the Plurality of Ethical Life

Instead of allowing the radical decision for Christ to be made by the individual, and this is the only way in which such a decision is genuinely possible for Kierkegaard, Christendom tranquilizes the individual. It takes the decision and thereby the potential for individuation in relation to God away. Kierkegaard's Christianity does not eliminate but calls for sharpening the difference between the religious and the secular. Christianity is "the most incurable break with" and severance from the secular ways of the world for the sake of redemption instead of the peace of worldly satisfaction.<sup>57</sup>

As a critic of the Enlightenment, who challenged the modern overextension of the secular rather than denying its difference from the religious, Kierkegaard remained in many ways close to its aspirations. For the sake of Christianity, Kierkegaard rejected the conflation of the religious and the secular promoted by both Christendom and secularization. Both Christendom and secularization collapse the separation and distinction between the worldly and the divine, thereby losing the sense of each. As Socratic gadfly to established Christendom, Kierkegaard challenged confusing the secular and religious, or *dulia et latría* as what is ethically owed to other humans as distinct from what is owed to God, in order to contest religious mystification of the religious. This confusion of differences and desire to assume power is itself a symptom of the modern crisis of religion according to *The Book on Adler*.<sup>58</sup>

Kierkegaard's differentiation of the religious and the secular is less reductive and more pluralistic—in the sense of love of the neighbor as singular other in contrast with the demand for dogmatic conformity to external institutions and "objective spirit" that is demanded by state Christianity and Hegel—than generally thought. Whereas other religious and secular models often conflate these divergent spheres by reducing one to the other, with dangerous consequences for both ethical and religious life, it is the ostensive "fideist" and "fundamentalist" Kierkegaard who differentiates religious and secular life without assimilating one to the other or eliminating either. Kierkegaard consequently rejects secularization, theocratization, and the violent integration of the multiplicity of ethical life into one "objective spirit."

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<sup>57</sup> *M*, 17-18.

<sup>58</sup> *BA*, 3-6.

This elucidation is strengthened by turning to the editor's preface of *The Book on Adler*.<sup>59</sup> Kierkegaard repeats there his analysis of the dangers of secularization that is part of the bewilderment of modernity, and which he illiberally analyzes as an "inability to obey." Kierkegaard is not of course a political or theological liberal in the nineteenth-century sense of these words, yet he continues by warning that the danger of modernity does not only consist of the self-willfulness and self-assertion of secularization. There is also the dialectically converse tendency that illegitimately assumes all authority from God in the name of God but in fact for its own sake. Religious self-willfulness compels every aspect of life—even that which is non-religious such as the political sphere—to answer to the religious sphere, and inappropriately assumes authority over all things. Kierkegaard here insightfully analyzes the fundamentalism that is itself a product of the religious crisis of modernity.

The modern crisis rests in the confusion and totalization of divergent and plural spheres of existence. This is not only promoted through secularization but through the opposite tendency of desecularization. The crisis of modernity is therefore also reflected in the destruction of the religious sphere by overly enthusiastic religious believers who compel everything non-religious to obey the religious and thereby make the religious non-religious.<sup>60</sup>

## 5. Difference and Indifference

Kierkegaard's separation of the secular and the religious allows him to appreciate the aesthetic, ethical, and even the ethical-religious aspects of non-Christian forms of belief and life. Unlike fideism, Kierkegaard does not claim that Jerusalem has nothing to do with Athens, as Socrates is his companion in his encounter with and exploration of Christianity. Unlike fundamentalism, Kierkegaard never claims that non-Christians are unethical but rather—akin to Schleiermacher<sup>61</sup>—that they have less complete experiences and conceptions of the ethical than that revealed in genuine Christianity.

Receptivity to what is non-Christian is seen in Kierkegaard's discussions of pagans and paganism, which he utilizes critically against Christen-

<sup>59</sup> BA, 3-6.

<sup>60</sup> BA, 3-6.

<sup>61</sup> E. S. Nelson, "Schleiermacher on Language, Religious Feeling, and the Ineffable," *Epoché* 8:2 (Spring 2004), 306.

dom's inadequacy. As a consequence, Kierkegaard could claim that official Christianity is less receptive to its genuine meaning than paganism was.<sup>62</sup> Or, more radically, "so-called Christendom is not Christian at all, that just like 'spiritlessness' it is far more pagan than paganism was."<sup>63</sup> This critique of fallen Christendom is not capricious or accidental, since it should be simultaneously Socratic for the sake of the truth and Christian on behalf of and out of love for even the "enemy."<sup>64</sup>

Kierkegaard distinguishes authentic Christianity from inauthentic Christendom, critiquing leveled Christendom as only self-deceptively Christian and actually worse than pagan. Whereas Christian pagans are obsessed with authority, power, status, and wealth, and are unlike Christ in categorizing others as friend and foe, the genuine pagan can achieve a greater religious consciousness than indifferent monotheists insofar as there is passion and awe for the incommensurable, the eternal, and the divine. Consequently, Kierkegaard could argue for the superiority of pagan religious passion over a Christian who indifferently lacks passion; "When passion is essentially present in the pagan, even his idolatry is not devoid of devoutness; although he has a false concept, he has the idea that one should fear God."<sup>65</sup>

As religion is nothing without passion, although it is not mere passion absorbed and transfixed in immediacy, it is better to passionately be an atheist indifferent to God than dispassionately or apathetically be a Christian. That is to say, it is more religious to be religiously irreligious than to irreligiously be religious.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, for Kierkegaard, the pagan, the atheist, and the non-Christian in general can attain the virtues of ethical life, as best indicated in the life and mission of Socrates, if not the faith—which should not be confused with doctrines<sup>67</sup>—that constitutes the fullness of the religious as distinct from the form of the ethical that is ethical yet does not overcome sin.<sup>68</sup>

The non-Christian, as the supposedly hyper-fideist Kierkegaard recognized, does not and need not partake in monotheistic language—whether as truth or as rhetorical linguistic strategy—in order to have some form of ethical life. Kierkegaard's approach is more nuanced

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<sup>62</sup> *M*, 157.

<sup>63</sup> *WA*, 87.

<sup>64</sup> *WA*, 87-88.

<sup>65</sup> *TA*, 64.

<sup>66</sup> *M*, 209.

<sup>67</sup> *JFY*, 194.

<sup>68</sup> *SUD*, 82-84, 89-90.

than its proponents and critics often suggest, since the pagan, the tragic hero, and secular life all have their duties and virtues, even if these are ultimately inadequate for Kierkegaard in comparison with the Christian—or deeply personal, self-reflexive, and ultimately ethical—overcoming of sin.

There are conditions and limits to Kierkegaard's pluralism to the extent that the genuine equality and multiplicity of singularly unique persons is only realizable in relation to the Christian God. Paganism is not intrinsically unethical or evil, as it is for the Christian fundamentalist and anti-pluralist, yet it is ethically inadequate in being tragic instead of redemptive. Paganism is tragic in lacking the possibility of salvation, since in Kierkegaard's analysis: (1) ethics is ultimately futile without the category of sin and its transcendence<sup>69</sup>; and (2) individual and social ethics can intervene in human life with good intentions and deeds yet still fail to redeem and save the individual.<sup>70</sup>

## 6. Equality, Plurality, and Singularity

The singularity and multiplicity of ethical personhood is further suggested in Kierkegaard's *Two Ages*. He there reverses potential egalitarian criticisms of his work by arguing for the individuating power of passion, as it is passion that gives form to the idea; even if it is the passion for equality and democracy of the revolutionary age, as opposed to their calculative and manipulative established forms of the present age.<sup>72</sup>

Kierkegaard maintained in the *Works of Love* that "*Christianity is so rigorous that it even asserts a heightened inequality.*"<sup>73</sup> I am more responsible than others, and in accusing others I accuse myself, "*like for like.*"<sup>74</sup> Such ethical-religious asymmetry is incompatible with some conceptions of equality yet Kierkegaard does not conclude with the negation of equality. On the contrary, he suggested in both his *Two Ages* and *Works of Love* that ethical asymmetry leads to an elevating equality between individu-

<sup>69</sup> *FT*, 98-99.

<sup>70</sup> *FT*, 106-107.

<sup>71</sup> *TA*, 66.

<sup>72</sup> *TA*, 29, 84; on the importance of distinguishing the ethical and the social in the *Two Ages*, which provides context for differentiating senses of equality, see Pia Soltoft, "A Literary Review: The Ethical and the Social," *Kierkegaard Studies: Yearbook 1999*, ed. N. J. Cappelørn et al. (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 110-129.

<sup>73</sup> *WL*, 382.

<sup>74</sup> *WL*, 382.

als *qua* individuals before God in contrast to the leveling political symmetry and indifferent equality of the public sphere in modern mass societies.<sup>75</sup>

According to “The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle,” individuals share in equal likeness in being unique before God. This equality of individuals is contrasted, on the one hand, with all the empirical dissimilarities of human existence<sup>76</sup>; and, on the other hand, the disappearance of all differences within the immanent totality of identity.<sup>77</sup> There is accordingly an unconditional and infinite equality insofar as all humans are each “equally close to God.”<sup>78</sup> This equality before God includes “every single individual human being” without reservation.<sup>79</sup> As an unconditional equality, making each asymmetrically responsible for the other, God obligates humans to love—however imperfectly—and prioritize the neighbor over the self.<sup>81</sup> The Christian is not less but more obligated to live for the other through Christ. Kierkegaard’s thinking of the religious is not only more complex than usually thought; it is an elemental challenge to the self-satisfied complacency of dogmatism, fideism, and fundamentalism, which are complicit with worldly domination. Kierkegaard’s Christianity implies that theocratic Christendom is primarily a political rather than a genuinely religious—i.e., ethical—phenomenon.

The singular individual, in all of its uniqueness, is invisible if it is approached as one more particular subsumed under a universal category or concept. This includes equality thought of as a universal that reduces multiplicity to interchangeability, whether it is—Kierkegaard notes—in the name of communism or Christianity.<sup>82</sup> The singular is only possible in relation to the essential and absolute difference between humans and God.<sup>83</sup> Whereas politics, the calculative logic and worldly wise understanding of the secular order, can only reductively address and attempt to achieve equality, Kierkegaard concludes that genuine equality and humanity remains necessarily and essentially religious.<sup>84</sup> This sense of equal-

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<sup>75</sup> Kierkegaard returns to this repeatedly in *TA*, 63, 92, 96, 107.

<sup>76</sup> *WL*, 69-74.

<sup>77</sup> *WA*, 99-100.

<sup>78</sup> *WA*, 165.

<sup>79</sup> *SUD*, 85.

<sup>80</sup> *WL*, 129.

<sup>81</sup> To the degree that M. J. Ferreira can speak of “The radical commitment to human equality at the heart of Kierkegaard’s ethic, indeed, of his life” in *Love’s Grateful Striving*, 47; cf. *WL*, 72.

<sup>82</sup> *BA*, 236.

<sup>83</sup> *WA*, 100.

<sup>84</sup> *PV*, 103-104.

ity, which he contrasts with the equivalence established in crowds and the masses, is seen in his thinking of the "ordinary person;"<sup>85</sup> for whom something infinitely high and of infinite concern is available.<sup>86</sup>

In contrast to Jan-Olav Henriksen's interpretation that Kierkegaard's thought is concerned with singularity but "ignores the whole problem of plurality," Kierkegaard's thinking of the religious, the secular, and the ethical is more radically pluralistic in relation to ethical life and religious experience than often acknowledged.<sup>87</sup> While remaining singularly Christian in being focused on Christ and oriented by love of the neighbor as a singular and specific other, it is at the same time resolutely pluralistic precisely for the sake of the unique individual's relationship with the unconditional. Part of the significance of Kierkegaard's portrayal of Christianity is that no Christian can leap in and take this away from any other even in the name of or for the sake of Christianity itself. This respect for individuality, including non-Christian others such as the pagans who Kierkegaard praises at times for being better Christians (that is, more faithful to the ethical moment) than Christians, is not a relativistic pluralism of mutual indifference wherein all are equal because no one makes a difference.

## 7. Conclusion

Kierkegaard's thought has pluralistic tendencies to the extent that he (1) opposes conflating Christianity, civil society and the public sphere, and the state, of which Hegel's philosophy of "objective spirit" is a primary example, and (2) recognizes to some extent (for ethical and religious rather than purely fideistic reasons) the multiplicity of spheres in ethical life in contrast with its theocratic or secular totalization and integration. Since God loves all as each, this pluralism is the truth of Christianity just as genuine Christianity is its truth according to Kierkegaard. This point is missed if Kierkegaardian ethics is primarily articulated through the figure of the judge in *Either/Or* or an irrational, fideistic, and anti-ethical reading of *Fear and Trembling*. This ethical dimension is invisible if

<sup>85</sup> Jørgen Bukdahl notes that Kierkegaard's religious equality is developed in relation to the ordinary person, a concern informing his critique of the church as hindering individual spiritual formation, in *Søren Kierkegaard and the Common Man*, trans. B. H. Kirmmse (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 111-130.

<sup>86</sup> *M*, 346-347.

<sup>87</sup> Henriksen, *Reconstruction of Religion*, 72.

Kierkegaard's critique of the political is seen as another instance of political engagement rather than as a primarily ethical interruption and interrogation of the political.<sup>88</sup> Kierkegaard denied advocating political and institutional conservation or reform in his polemical writings.<sup>89</sup> He could deny having a conservative or reformist political purpose because his polemics and critiques have a Socratic, deconstructive, and stinging ethically self-reflexive function.

Kierkegaard's ethically-oriented "pluralism" of individuals as asymmetrical or unique singularities cannot be a set of particulars embodying or subsumed under a universal category. That is, such pluralism is not political, however benevolently conceived, but ethical, and the ethical finds its addressee (the singular individual) in genuine Christianity. Whereas the political is numerical or additive, leveling each to all and to calculative prudence unconcerned with the singular, the ethical challenges these quantitative categories in the name and for the sake of that in each case singular person. Kierkegaard's criticism of "leveling" does not rule out the equality that he does advocate, which is—to adopt a phrase from Jean Luc Nancy—a "singular plural" equality in which each individual in her or his singularity infinitely matters.

Kierkegaard did not conceive of himself as a progressive pluralistic thinker, and it is not my argument that he did or needed to do this. Yet religious and ethically inspired tendencies toward care for and respect of the other are at work in his writings. One need not be conflating Kierkegaard with Levinas or Derrida to contend that these interruptive, deconstructive, and critical—and consequently not merely "irrational"—moments of the other in the self indicate the traces of an alternative in our own present age in which institutional religious authority and politicized religion are frequently employed against and over others. Such religion is infinitely distant for Kierkegaard from the love, charity, and sense of equality that emerges between asymmetrical and non-identical concrete living individuals in genuine religiosity.

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<sup>88</sup> This ethically-oriented reading diverges from that of R. L. Perkins, who regards Kierkegaard's intensifying critique of Christendom as a turn to the political (despite Kierkegaard's explicit denial of being politically motivated) rather than its ethical questioning, in "Kierkegaard's Anti-Climacus in his Social and Political Environment" *Practice in Christianity* (International Kierkegaard Commentary, vol. 20), ed. R. L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 275-302.

<sup>89</sup> *COR*, 53.